

Ballroom dancing: Old fad experiences a revival



When the spin and turn goes awry, the end result can resemble a wrestling move rather than a dance step for students in the University of Michigan dance club.

photos by BILL JANSEN

By Joanne Sobczak special writer

SUZANNE PETTY HITS THE dance floor as a new pop tune fills the room. The strobe light is flashing while the floor pulsates. "Aid groove gonna make your body mope... I'll take control of your mind and make you move your behind... Wiggle it, just a little bit."

"Yeah," she admits, "I like to wiggle it a little bit." Petty believes guys like to "wiggle-it, too."

But when the idea of using ballroom dance steps to this song is mentioned to the 23-year-old radio receptionist, her first thoughts are of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Yes, ballroom dancers wiggle it, but "in their own way." "I think it (ballroom dance) is beautiful," Petty said. "But I'd rather do freestyle. I like to do my own thing. But I'd give it a shot."

Freestyle is a term for dancing without holding your partner or even needing one. Dance instructor Frankie Gel calls it "spastic."

"Dance is at the bottom of the barrel for those under 20," said Gel, a retired Arthur Murray instructor. "There is an interest in listening to music but not in dancing to it. And if they are interested in it, they do freestyle."

GEL RECALLS his youth when there wasn't television and young people didn't have their own cars.

"We had the Graystone Ballroom in Detroit and Eastwood Gardens," he said. "You know, ballroom dancing never died, it just slowed down a bit with rock'n'roll in the '60s and '70s."

Disco started popping up after John Travolta's dances scenes in "Saturday Night Fever." That incited ballroom dance's revival, according to Gel, who teaches adult

ballroom dance at the Bloomfield Hills Education Center and gives private lessons to clients in Bloomfield Hills and Grosse Pointe.

Twenty percent of his students are in their late 20s to early 30s although the average age is, about 50, he said. He gets young couples who either are getting married or just got married.

Carol Jackson, editor and publisher of "Dance Letter," a newsletter that circulates to more than 1,000 metro area ballroom dance fans, has found universities adding ballroom dance classes to their curriculums.

"Students tell me they're using dance to relieve stress and as a form of exercise," she said.

Jackson classifies herself as "serious social dancer." Her expertise is in Street Hustle, an American ballroom dance characterized by spins and Latin hip motion. One can see her experience as she moves across the dance floor.

"I THINK ballroom dance is going to become as popular as it was in its heyday (the late '30s to early '70s) with more excitement and athletics," she said. In fact, the Rochester resident hopes that Detroit will recapture its early 1940s title of "Dance Capital."

You can get instruction for as little as \$1 an hour or \$35 for seven lessons at some of the clubs listed in Jackson's publication. Private lessons, however, begin at \$25 an hour.

"First, you have to perfect the basic steps and then there is technique and styling," she said. "Anyone who can walk, can dance. Now not all are going to start in the same place. It also depends on how inhibited you are and determine how fast you'll be able to achieve the level of dance that you will be confident with."

As Gel sees it, "you weren't born dancing. The more you dance with different people, the better you become."

Both dancers frequent places like Characters, a night spot in Warren which "appears" to be for dancers only. Jackson lists Characters in her newsletter calendar along with the Clawson Steak House in Clawson, Tremors in Livonia and The Grotto in Ann Arbor. Other locations include studios and halls where you can move your feet to the music.

CUSTOMERS HAVE that Characters is unique and is patronized by ballroom dancers 25 years and up from throughout the metropolitan area. You don't go to this club to brawl. You come to strut your stuff.

Gayle Grenadier of Southfield doesn't date anybody at present. Her social-life is characters.

"This place is where a single person can come and be with other dance-minded people, dance their heart out and then go home without having the hassle of going to a bar and having guys hit on you," she said. "Occasionally, some strays who don't dance come in and do the things males usually do."

Grenadier, a substitute teacher in Ferndale, took group lessons offered at Characters. (At least eight different classes take place at the club weekly.) The classes were \$5 per one-hour session. She now takes private instruction in her home at \$30 an hour.

"Dancing has to be an element now," said Grenadier about any future men in her life. "If he doesn't dance, I strongly suggest he take lessons."

Are those dance floor worshippers smug and eliquish at spots like Characters?

NOT EXACTLY, according to regular John Price. "You can set foot past the entrance but expect to be able to use it, if you want to have a good time."

"I think, if anything, people are intimidated by themselves because they can't do this type of dancing... they limit themselves," he said. "They don't face that issue and learn to dance."

An electrical contractor, Price used to prefer freestyle dancing. A patron of Characters for five years, he has had three years of dance instruction.

"I always wanted to dance," he said. "In the last few years, I've learned a number of different dances and I enjoy it when I get on the floor. It takes your mind off your outside life, your work life and the stress problems."

Donna Perkins came with a group of people she already was acquainted with from another singles bar. They told her, "If you like precision dancing, you're going to really enjoy yourself."

Perkins was introduced to Price that evening and he remains one of her current partners "in dance only."

"The people here are friendly to me," said Perkins, a legal secretary with five months of group lessons under her belt. "I

danced that night and had a ball. I've been coming ever since."

Even though the Hustle and Swing are predominant at the club (as they are in the national dance scene), the music varies, giving everybody a chance to practice whatever is their preference in ballroom steps.

Regardless of the choice, no one on Characters' dance floor, which can accommodate as many as 80 couples, does freestyle — it's "hands on" your partner.

"I like it because it's an art," Perkins added. "I like dancing where you need rhyme or reason."

Individuals interested in the group lessons at Characters Nite Club can call 979-3071 for more information. Dancers interested in a subscription to Dance Letter can call Carol Jackson at 652-2688.



In lieu of the Big Band, Vern Fath plays disc jockey, getting the "boom box" to play the right tune of the right CD.

Dancing away school daze

By Joanne Sobczak special writer

Students may now be able to wait their way through college.

Ken Powell, a professor of aerospace engineering at the University of Michigan along with six other staff and faculty members created the U-M Ballroom Dance Club last fall.

"We wanted to get young people dancing and provide a place where students can dance cheaply without having to bring a partner," Powell said.

The first meeting of the club attracted more than 80 people of all ages and dance levels.

The club meets Sunday evenings at the Central Campus Recreation Building for one hour of professional instruction, followed by an additional hour of general dancing. A \$1 fee is charged for attending each class, but there is no membership fees.

While the Swing, Cha-Cha and Lambada are the group's favorites, other dances taught include the Rumba, Fox Trot, Mambo, Samba, Polka and Waltz.

CRAIG ROYS and Helen Naum didn't meet dancing but they did form a fabulous friendship first talking about it.

Roys, a junior at Oakland University, said he probably wouldn't have considered dance lessons, if Naum, a recent OU grad, had asked him to be her partner. Naum and Roys enrolled in a ballroom dance course offered at OU.

Jack Henley and his wife — an assistant dance instructor — last semester taught dancing to a class of 45 — mix of mostly students as well as faculty and guests.

"People who like dancing show the flexibility and enjoyableness of American culture," said the retired Arthur Murray instructor.

"There has been a gradual climb in interest in ballroom dance the last 15 years," the Livonia resident said. "It has pinnacled today with what seems to be a fever for it."

ROYS AND Naum prove that point. "We had a lot of fun every week," Roys said. "We liked the Tango, but we also had fun with the Swing and the Fox Trot."

While U-M and OU are giving their students an opportunity to move to the music, Eastern Michigan University Ballroom Dance Club holds dances on Tuesday evenings in the McKenny Union Building. There's no cover charge, but parking is \$2. Music is by DJ Dorian Deaver includes top 40, Latin and ballroom.

More information on the dance classes can be obtained by calling OU and U-D. For information on the U-M Ballroom Club, call 588-2491. Or call 487-4638 for information on the EMU dance club.



U-M dance instructor Ken Powell explains the intricacies of move with the help of co-instructor Sanne Krummel.

Characters 'swings' to the music

By Joanne Sobczak special writer

Garvin Wilson says he did what typical males do in bars — hit on the women. Now, instead he "hustles" them, thanks to dance instructor Mary Wolf.

On the dance floor, Wolf, a former Arthur Murray dance teacher, exerts confidence in herself and instills it in her students.

"I take people who don't know their left foot from their right and who never

danced this kind of dancing before and by the end of the hour, they're doing the basic steps in whatever dance they were interested in learning," she said.

Wolf teaches one-hour weekly classes at Characters Nightclub in Warren (979-2671). The cost is \$35 for seven classes. She started there 3 1/2 years ago with just a dozen people. Her current enrollment has grown to 250 students and is divided up among seven classes — beginners to advance.

She bases her success on the price of the classes and because they're "fun." The final touch, she said, is her assistant, Larry Joseph, a 31-year-old former Arthur Murray instructor.

"Because I have Larry in my classes with me, the guys get the male point of view on their steps," she said.

An additional aspect is that the club provides the "practice" atmosphere. "Characters is one of the only places that you can come to where the music played is compatible with the dances you are learning in the classes," she said. "This is where the dancers hang out."